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The Final Frontier for the Faithful: Islamic Rulings on Space

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AMNA KALHORO, MAY 17 2023

The Muslim world's fascination with space exploration has sparked discussions on its religious legitimacy, prompting debates on the permissibility of such endeavours. Muslim countries, such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Pakistan, and Turkey, have developed their own space programmes, launched satellites, and are planning to send Muslim astronauts into space, in consultation with Islamic scholars. Islamic rulings on space activities for Muslim countries are not uniform or authoritative but rather a dynamic process that depends on the opinions of various scholars and organizations. Some scholars argue that space exploration is permissible as long as it does not harm God's creation or violate Islamic principles. The issue of space tourism has emerged, with non-binding legal opinions or fatwas being issued to assist Muslim astronauts in observing their faith in space.

Some scholars believe that certain space activities are prohibited (haram), and they cite the Quranic verse "Don't kill yourself with your own hands" (Quran 2:195) considering space-related activities, especially space tourism, as equivalent to self-harm. They argue that partaking in space tourism involves risk and violates the self-preservation principle, or the duty to protect oneself from damage. Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, has stated that space tourism is not permissible as it involves unnecessary risk and extravagance. Another Saudi Arabian Islamic scholar, Sheikh Al-Habib Ali Al-Jifri, has expressed the opinion that space tourism violates the sanctity of life and wastes resources that could be better used for the benefit of humanity.

In 2014, a fatwa council in the United Arab Emirates issued a ruling denouncing participation in the Mars One project, after the thousands of applications from Muslims desiring a one-way trip to the Red Planet. The endeavour, according to the council, would be suicidal and go against Islamic values because it would imperil human life and ruin God's creation by leaving space debris. Despite this fatwa, the "Hope" spacecraft was successfully launched to Mars by the United Arab Emirates Space Agency on July 19, 2020. As part of the Mars 2117 project to construct a human settlement on the Red Planet, the orbiter successfully arrived at Mars on February 9, 2021, after completing a Mars orbit insertion maneuver that lasted for around 27 minutes. The UAE is the only Muslim-Arab nation to achieve this, and the sixth nation worldwide (after the US, Russia, China, and India).

The alternative school of thought holds that space travel is permissible if it does not conflict with one's ability to engage in religious practises like fasting, prayer, or the right position of the Qibla. Experts have agreed that Muslims should continue to pray and fast even while they are in space. They have developed a few methods, such as utilising a digital compass or aligning the spacecraft with the position of the Earth, for detecting the direction of the Qibla, the direction Muslims face while praying.

In 2007, Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, a Malaysian astronaut, was able to perform Islamic rituals such as prayer and fasting during his time in space. Sheikh Saleh Al Fawzan a Saudi Arabian scholar, has also affirmed the permissibility of prayer and fasting in space, provided that space travel does not violate Islamic principles. Interestingly, the first Arab astronaut, Saudi Prince Sultan bin Salman, also performed Islamic rituals such as reading the Quran, praying, and fasting during his space mission in 1985. He described this experience as enhancing his closeness with the Almighty.

Islam encourages individuals to research new things, explore the world, and increase their knowledge. There are numerous verses and hadiths in the Quran and the Sunna (the teachings and customs of the Prophet Muhammad) that exhort Muslims to seek knowledge and wisdom, and use their intellect and reason to explore the signs of Allah in the cosmos. For example, Allah says in the Quran: "O company of jinn and mankind, if you are able to pass beyond the regions of the heavens and the earth, then pass. You will not pass except by authority [from Allah]" (Quran 55:33).

The human race is encouraged by this verse from the Quran to explore the cosmos beyond the spheres of the heavens and the earth. The verse implies that if we are capable of going beyond these realms, we should do so. It emphasises the necessity of acting within the confines of what is allowed according to Islamic beliefs while simultaneously embracing the quest for scientific and technical development. Allah has given humans the ability and permission to explore and travel to outer space. In another verse, "And He has subjected for you the night and day and the sun and moon, and the stars are subjected by His command. Indeed, in that are signs for people who reason" (Quran 16:12).

This verse from Surah An-Nahl highlights Allah's creation and control of the entire universe, including all of its elements, such as the stars, sun, and moon. It emphasises the vastness and intricacy of the universe, urging humans to explore and appreciate its wonders. The verse also underlines the significance of using our reasoning and reflective abilities to obtain a better knowledge of the universe and its signs. Space exploration allows us to observe and comprehend these signs in greater depth.

Islamic scholars consider various factors when issuing a ruling on space exploration. The intent of the journey comes first, followed by a consideration of the advantages and disadvantages for the individual. The third is to follow Islamic practises in outer space, and the fourth is to respect Allah's creation and his manifestations.

With certain challenges, space exploration can provide significant advantages for Islamic nations, which have a long history of astronomical contributions. One advantage of space exploration for Muslim countries is that it can boost their scientific and technological skills. Many Muslim countries have developed space programmes to launch satellites, rockets, or astronauts into orbit. These programmes can assist Islamic countries in developing their infrastructure, education, innovation, and economies. Egypt's satellites, for instance, are anticipated to support the expansion of the Suez Canal axis and keep an eye on Egypt's water security. Investments in space technology and research can benefit Muslim nations in many ways, including economic diversification and job creation as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's plan to boost its space programmes by $2 billion by 2030.

The ability to foster global cooperation and dialogue amongst different nations and religions is another advantage of space exploration. Islamic nations can promote mutual understanding, respect, and trust by working together with other nations on space initiatives. Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, a Malaysian astronaut who visited the International Space Station in 2007 with Russian assistance, also carried out experiments on board with astronauts from the United States, Japan, and Germany. The first Muslim nation to deploy a lunar rover, Turkey, also revealed plans to work with SpaceX to launch its first moon mission in 2023. NASA believes that international cooperation in space can lower expenses, boost productivity, and improve safety.

However, Muslim nations also have several difficulties, the most fundamental of which relates to Islamic practises and laws. For instance, many Muslims face Mecca when they pray, yet while a spacecraft is orbiting Earth at 17,400 miles per hour, Mecca passes rapidly below the spaceship. Similarly, Muslims fast during Ramadan from dawn until dark; however, there are 16 sunrises and 16 sunsets per day in space. Therefore, Muslim countries need to consult with Islamic scholars and authorities to find solutions and guidelines for these issues. For instance, some Islamic scholars have suggested performing prayers facing Earth or in the last known direction of Mecca and fasting according to the local time at the launch site.

Geopolitical and security concerns also exist, as other countries may perceive their actions as dangerous or confrontational. The US has denounced Iran's satellite launches, calling them a breach of UN resolutions and a cover for ballistic missile development. Israel has also accused Egypt's space programme of being a spy operation.

Security threats from hostile actors could potentially come from their ability to interfere with or sabotage space assets. Furthermore, scientific and technological barriers because many countries lack the necessary resources, expertise, and infrastructure. Technical issues and financial limitations have caused delays and setbacks in Pakistan's space programme.

To address these complex issues, it is crucial for Muslim countries to consult with Islamic scholars, legal experts, and international partners. The development of a robust and sustainable space programme can offer numerous benefits to Muslim countries, and Islamic rulings must be considered a source of motivation to explore the cosmos. By witnessing the wonders and mysteries of Allah's creation in space, Muslims can increase their faith and gratitude to Him. Space exploration can also inspire spiritual enlightenment among Muslims.

About the author:

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